

Mary: Woman of the Eucharist

June 22, 2014

On this solemn Feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord, *Corpus Christi*, during the novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, it is not only appropriate, but, one could say, obligatory to “take what is set before us” and reflect on the relationship between the Blessed Virgin and the Most Blessed Sacrament.

I hesitate somewhat to tell you, but I do feel the need to give a small disclaimer: in the last 31 years – the duration of my religious life – there have been two topics that have caused me disquiet, even dread, when I was asked to give a talk, presentation, or class on them. Not because I disliked or was uncomfortable with the topics, but because I could never really communicate the depth, the beauty, the splendor, and the awesomeness of these two subjects, with any of the eloquence they deserved. No matter what I could say or would say, there was so much more, so much beauty and truth to convey, that I always felt that I had failed the Subject.

I’m sure you know what I am going to say next. These two topics are the Eucharist and Mary, and now I am going to try to speak about both in the same presentation.

With that said, please know that no matter what I say in the next 20 minutes or so there is so much more to say about these two precious jewels that we as Catholics have. Don’t discredit the message because of the messenger. These two, the Eucharist and the

Blessed Virgin, *are* jewels, but they are jewels that require faith to see their true beauty.

Toward the end of his life St. Thomas Aquinas said of all that he had written, “It is straw,” but some of the most beautiful words written about the Blessed Sacrament were written by him and later translated by the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins. I think it is good to begin with these.

*Godhead here in hiding, He whom I adore
Masked by these bare shadows, shape and
nothing more,*

*See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.*

*Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived;
How says trusty hearing? That shall be
believed;*

*What God’s Son has told me, take for truth I
do;*

*Truth himself speaks truly or there’s nothing
true.*

*Truth himself speaks truly or there’s nothing
true.* What does Truth himself say? In John Chapter 6 Jesus says,

“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. ... I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.

... Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (Jn 6: 35, 51, 53-54).

Truth also says, as we read in the Gospel of Luke of the Last Supper, the institution of the Eucharist:

“Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.’ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you’” (Lk 22:19-20).

This self-gift is completed the following day on the Cross.

In Chapter 19 of the Gospel of John, Truth says, “Woman, behold your son;” and then, “Behold you mother” (Jn 19:26b-27).

The love contained in the words of these three passages is indescribable. What more could He give us more precious than His very self *and* His prized possession, the crown of His creation, His Mother? *Truth himself speaks truly or there’s nothing true.* Only in faith can we see the truth, the beauty and the love contained in the Most Blessed Sacrament; only with this disposition can we grow in our

understanding, love and reverence for the Eucharist, and, I think, for Mary.

In faith, now, we can try to grow in our appreciation of these two jewels and in their relationship, one with the other.

As He approached His passion Jesus promised His distressed apostles, “I will not leave you orphans” (Jn 14:18). On our own we can do nothing; on our own we, His flock, are easy prey for the wolves that prowl, seeking for souls to devour. In these consoling words, “I will not leave you orphans,” it seems to me that Jesus is promising that He will not leave us ... and so He gives us His abiding Presence – Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity – in the Blessed Sacrament. He is with us in all the tabernacles of the world, waiting to be loved and adored with grateful affection. There we go to seek the comfort, guidance, protection, and nourishment we need.

Could He not also be referring to the gift of His Mother? (And just parenthetically, let me quote the saints who taught us that what can be said of Mary in specific can be said of the Church in general and, vice versa, what can be said of the Church can be said of Mary.) We have a mother – a real mother – who cares for us, guides us, protects us. We are not orphans. Again, without faith we can neither see nor understand these hope-filled truths.

This talk is not the proper occasion to expound or propound on all the teachings and truths contained in the doctrines of the Eucharist and on Mary; we haven’t the time for that at our

disposal. What we can do, and what I propose to do, is to let Mary, good mother that she is, teach us about Her Son, living and present in the Eucharist and the consequent response that should elicit in us. This was the topic Pope St. John Paul II wrote about in the last chapter of his very last encyclical, which was his *Letter on the Eucharist (Ecclesia de Eucharistia)*. The chapter is entitled “At the School of Mary, Woman of the Eucharist”. His words will propel us in the right direction.

In this letter he tells us that “there is no one like Mary to act as our support and guide in acquiring” the proper disposition for growing in our understanding of the Eucharist (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 53).

Mary, more than any other, would have a profound understanding of the Eucharist. She experienced the reality and lived the Eucharistic life before anyone else even had a clue or an inkling of the reality of the greatest event ever possible; the event toward which all of human history tends and that which changed human history forever: God pitched His tent among us; He came to dwell among us; the Word was made flesh ... all in Mary’s womb.

Mary may not have been able to comprehend the magnitude of this event – what finite being could – but she had not doubt of the identity of the One growing within her. How could she? The angel said, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son ... He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High.” And later in response to her question,

the angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1:31-35).

Mary knew the manner of the conception of her Son. She knew the truth of the angels’ words; she knew the child was not conceived in the natural manner and that He had no human father. In short, she knew – though there was no exact precedent to consult – that the child she would protect and nourish in her womb and bring up as her child, was God.

Now here is a beautiful thought. What was Mary’s faith-filled, trusting reply to the angel? To see the impact of her words, let’s look at her answer in three different languages ... which is not as impressive as it sounds. First she says, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.” Then in English she would have said, “Be it done to me according to your word.” In Latin, it would have been one simple word, “fiat.” In Hebrew? The word is “Amen.” The angel, in a sense, says to her, ‘Will you receive the Word of God, the Son of the Father, into your body?’ She says, “Amen.”

Does that sound familiar?

“The Body of Christ.”

“Amen.”

Mary was the first to receive God into her body. We receive that same God into ours. We acknowledge this and profess our belief in this with the same word Mary used: “Amen.”

Like Mary we are called to be living tabernacles, holding God's presence, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. Like Mary we are also called to be living monstrances, carrying God's presence with us, letting It shine through our humanity. What a powerful word, Amen.

It expressed Mary's consent to be the Mother of the Incarnate Word and it expresses our profession of faith in His Real Presence in the Eucharist and our consent and agreement to living a life that is in cohesion with our beliefs.

"The Eucharist," says Pope St. John Paul II, "is in continuity with the Incarnation." (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 55). "At the Annunciation Mary conceived the Son of God in the physical reality of His Body and Blood, thus anticipating within herself what to some degree happens sacramentally in every believer who receives, under the signs of bread and wine, the Lord's body and blood." (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 55).

Mary gave the Incarnate Word His Body and Blood which would, some 30 years later, be the Body and Blood that He gave us in the Eucharist. That is the most intimate relationship that could ever exist between a human person and the Most Blessed Sacrament. "The connection between Mary and the Eucharist is the bond between mother and son" (Archbishop Angelo Amato, SDB, "Reflections on *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* – 10").

Out of the Church's treasury of art there is an ancient hymn to the Eucharist that immediately comes to mind. In Latin, the

language in which it was written, it says "Ave, verum corpus natum de Maria Virgine, vere passum, immolatum, in cruce pro homine;" in English it is, "Hail, true body born of the Virgin Mary Who truly suffered, sacrificed on the Cross for man..."

Pope St. John Paul II says very succinctly in one or two sentences what I have taken minutes and paragraphs to describe; he says, "Mary was asked to believe that the One whom she conceived 'through the Holy Spirit' was 'the Son of God' (Lk 1:30-35). In continuity with the Virgin's faith, in the Eucharistic mystery we are asked to believe that the same Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, becomes present in his full humanity and divinity under the signs of bread and wine" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 55).

To this we say, "Amen."

The abiding presence of the Incarnate Word under the appearance of bread allows us to not only receive Him into our own bodies and allow ourselves to be transformed by Him, into Him, it also gives us the ability to gaze upon Him – albeit under material signs – and adore our God as we will for all eternity in heaven.

Again the Blessed Mother, His Blessed Mother and ours, can teach us how to do this, and with her, her cousin Elizabeth. When Mary said, "Be it done unto me, fiat, amen," the Word of God became man in her womb. The Word became flesh and, as I said earlier, Mary became the first tabernacle, the first monstrance as she carried Him in haste

through the hill country of Judea to Elizabeth (Lk 1:39). In his characteristic way, Pope Emeritus Benedict once said, "In a certain way we can say that her journey was ... the first 'Eucharistic procession' in history. Mary, living Tabernacle of God made flesh, is the Ark of the Covenant in whom the Lord visited and redeemed his people" (Benedict XVI, May 31, 2005).

Here, the Son of God "still invisible to our human gaze, allowed Himself to be adored by Elizabeth," as she became aware of His presence through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and, as it were, through His own light "radiating ... through the eyes and voice of Mary" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 55). How could Mary not sing,

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my savior.
For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness;
behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed.
The Mighty One has done great things for me
and holy is his name" (Lk 1:46-49)?

And then nine months later at His birth, as Pope St. John Paul II says, "is not the enraptured gaze of Mary as she contemplated the face of the newborn Christ and cradled Him in her arms that unparalleled model of love" and I add, of adoration (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 55)? Mary, looking upon the face of a newborn, utterly helpless baby, adored

her God, creator and master of the universe. What faith, what love, what perfect adoration.

Beyond all that her senses are telling her, that here in her care is a baby that needed her for nourishment, shelter, protection, care and nurturing, who would later guide his faltering first steps and from her learn how to feed himself, she worshipped and adored her God. This, the God of the Jews who most often in times previous revealed Himself in spectacular ways: a smoking brazier, a pillar of cloud, a column of fire, a burning bush, an overshadowing cloud, but occasionally as with Elijah, He manifested Himself in ways that reflected His birth, that is, in a gentle breeze and a whispering sound, was now in her arms helpless and in need of her. She gazes at Him, this newborn babe who can barely move His arms and legs, and says, "My Lord and My God."

Not unlike this, we are asked to step outside the realms of our sense knowledge and looking upon what appears to be a tasteless impotent wafer, adore our God. Adore this, the same God revealed in the Old Testament in fantastic ways, the same God who cares for us, provides for us, *loves* us to death, saves us from our sins and their due punishment, and who will judge us at the moment of our passing from this life to the next.

Our setting is different than Mary's but the reality is the same. In this light, listen again to the sublime words of St. Thomas Aquinas:

*Godhead here in hiding, He whom I adore
Masked by these bare shadows, shape and
nothing more,
See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.*

*Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived;
How says trusty hearing? That shall be
believed;
What God's Son has told me, take for truth I
do;
Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing
true.*

A few minutes ago I quoted the saints who said that what can be said of Mary in specific can be said of the Church in general and, vice versa, what can be said of the Church can be said of Mary. We know that the Church and the Eucharist are inseparably united," without the Eucharist we would not have the Church and without the Church we would not have the Eucharist. So too, says Pope St. John Paul II, "the same ought to be said of Mary and the Eucharist" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 57). They are inseparably united.

Without the Incarnation, which in God's plan required the cooperation of the woman's "yes, fiat, amen," we could not have the Eucharist. Mary gave God a body, that He, in turn, would give to us at the Last Supper and on the Cross, and then in His abiding presence in the Eucharist.

I would like, just briefly, to look at our two-fold topic of the Eucharist and Mary from a different angle, hopefully coming to

appreciate these two jewels from yet another facet.

St. John Bosco lived in the second half of the 19th century; he is famous for his work with the youth. He was also blessed with many spiritual gifts; for instance, he could read souls and help his boys in the confessional. Another one of his gifts was his prophetic dreams. In 1862 he had one of his most famous. In his dream he was standing on a cliff that jutted out into a tumultuous sea. He could see rising from the sea two pillars: the taller, stronger, larger pillar was surmounted by the Eucharist; a second pillar was surmounted by the Blessed Virgin Mary.

A naval battle was taking place on the stormy sea; all of the enemy ships were attacking one large, stately ship whose commander, the Holy Father, was standing at the helm. After many attacks, the Holy Father steers his ship safely between the two pillars and securely anchors it there. When the enemy ships see this they are thrown into a panic and attack each other; eventually all the enemy either disperse or sink. At this, all the ships that fought on behalf of the Pope's ship come to anchor safely between the two pillars of the Eucharist and Mary and the sea clams

The meaning of this prophetic dream seems obvious. Many assaults will attack the Church, but as the Holy Father keeps her steadfastly anchored in the safety of true devotion to the Eucharist and to the Blessed Virgin, nothing will be able to assail her.

The same would have to be true for each of us. If we remain faithful to worthy reception and loving adoration of the Eucharist and true devotion to Our Blessed Mother, we are not always promised smooth sailing, but safe arrival at our destination. Mary, Star of the Sea, will keep us safe as she guides us to her Son.

If we can become more like Mary, a truly Eucharistic soul, our whole life can become more like hers, and we will be able to sing praise to God in our own Magnificat:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;

my spirit rejoices in God my savior.”

